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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RPO DUBAI 000545

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/12/23

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: IRAN OPPOSITION PLANS TASUA AND ASHURA PROTESTS

CLASSIFIED BY: Charles Pennypacker, Consular Officer, DOS, IRPO;
REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Iran's 'Green Path' opposition expects the religious holidays Tasua and Ashura on December 26th and 27th to be the movement's next significant protests. These holidays commemorate the martyrdom of Hossein, the Prophet Mohammad's grandson, and typically create an emotionally charged atmosphere in Iran. The 'Green Path' opposition is hoping to use that atmosphere, as well as ceremonies associated with Grand Ayatollah Montazeri's death and the ripped Khomeini picture affair, to continue pushing for change. IRIG security forces will likely be on the streets in an attempt to ensure calm, but the same harsh warnings from senior security officials directed at oppositionists that preceded earlier planned opposition rallies have so far been absent, perhaps due to the holidays' religious nature. As the recent planned protests on Student Day appealed primarily to students, Tasua and Ashura will be the first opportunity since the November 4 anniversary of US Embassy takeover in Iran to gauge the movement's broader appeal. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) The Shia religious holidays Tasua and Ashura commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hossein and occur this year on December 26th and 27th. Imam Hossein was the Prophet Mohammad's grandson, and according to Shias, the third Imam. He died during the Battle of Karbala when he and a small group of his followers were killed by forces loyal to the Sunni Caliphate Yazid. Tasua and Ashura are marked with emotionally charged public processions wherein mourners chant and beat their heads and chests to emulate Hossein's suffering and, separately, re-enact his martyrdom in 'passion plays.' The holiday is one of the most widely observed religious holidays in Iran and government officials, including Ayatollah Khamenei, typically attend mourning rituals.

¶3. (U) Consistent with its approach to Qods Day (September 18), the anniversary of the US Embassy in Tehran (November 4), Student Day (December 7), and Grand Ayatollah Montazeri's funeral (December 21), the 'Green Movement' opposition is encouraging its supporters to use the holiday as a forum for anti-regime protests. On December 14 the opposition website Mowjcamp released a statement outlining several activities during the Islamic month of Moharram, culminating with Tasua and Ashura (the 9th and 10th days of Moharram). The activities include lighting candles to honor the 'martyrs' of the movement and meetings with the families of those killed or imprisoned; the statement also lists suggested slogans to chant during the protests.

¶4. (C) The tension in Iran and animosity between the 'Green Path' opposition leaders and the IRIG seem to have increased since Student Day, perhaps pushing more people to join the protests. Just after Student Day, IRIB began broadcasting footage purportedly of Student Day protesters tearing and burning a photo of Ayatollah Khomeini. The footage sparked broad criticism of the 'Green Path' opposition leaders, which was followed by declarations of allegiance to Khomeini from all corners of the Islamic Republic.

Mousavi and Karrubi denounced such conduct but alleged that the footage was a government attempt to smear the opposition. On December 16 Judiciary Chief Larijani warned the 'leaders of sedition' against further activity, alleging that the Judiciary has enough information to arrest them, prompting a fiery response from Mehdi Karrubi. Grand Ayatollah Montazeri's death gives the opposition a new rallying call just ahead of the protests, particularly as the traditional 7th day mourning ritual for Montazeri falls during Tasua and Ashura. However, on December 22 Grand Ayatollah Montazeri's son Ahmad announced that the traditional third and seventh day mourning ceremonies for his father were cancelled. He cited 'security reasons,' following the December 22 attack of plainclothes officials on the Grand Ayatollah Montazeri's office.

15. (C) After generally avoiding direct conflict with protesters on Qods Day, the security forces confronted protesters much more aggressively on the anniversary of the US embassy takeover and confined Student Day protests to university campuses. The religious nature of Tasua and Ashura, however, may make the IRIG more hesitant to violently confront protesters. As an IRPO contact pointed out, "they [the IRIG] can't stop people from chanting 'Ya Hossein,' wearing green, or being on the streets," as these are all commonplace for Tasua and Ashura. Although there has not to date been the same warnings from senior security officials that preceded Qods day, for example, the Law Enforcement Forces have announced that security forces will be on hand, and have issued general guidelines as to the appropriate behavior expected from participants (for example, participants have been asked not to stab themselves in the head with knives, a traditional activity

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associated with these dates but frowned upon by Supreme Leader Khamenei, who thinks that it 'gives the wrong impression').

16. (C) COMMENT: Politicized Tasua and Ashura commemorations played an important role in the build-up to the Islamic Revolution, and the 'Green Path' opposition is hoping that lightning can strike twice in this regard. It has demonstrated its ability during the past few months to bring at least tens of thousands of Iranians into the streets to protest against the government and probably will do so again. One IRPO contact who travels between Iran and Dubai anticipated, even before Montazeri's death, that Tasua and Ashura would be "very big" and that turnout will eclipse Qods Day participation. A prominent US-based oppositionist said the 'Green Path' opposition is hoping to draw 'millions into the streets, turning the holiday into a referendum on Khamenei's leadership.' However, even if the Green Path can turn out a good crowd, it has not demonstrated the ability to turn scattered demonstrations of popular support into sustained leverage against the regime. Indeed, Supreme Leadership Khamenei and other senior IRIG leaders have shown ever less willingness to compromise and, at this stage, it is not clear how regime opponents intend to use sporadic rallies and demonstrations of popular support to realize their calls for change. END COMMENT.
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